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Natural resources and intifada: oil, phosphates and resistance to colonialism in Western Sahara

Joanna Allan

On 28 October 2013, US company Kosmos, Scottish Cairn Energy and the Moroccan Office of Hydrocarbons and Mines (ONHYM) announced their joint plans to drill for oil in 'one of the last undrilled petroleum systems along the Atlantic Margin' (Maxted 2013). Simon Thomson, CEO of Cairn Energy commented that his company's share in the farm-in Agreement would build on its existing 'strategic presence' in 'Morocco' (Thomson 2013). His key mistake was that the block to be explored – Cap Boujdour Offshore – is not in Morocco at all, but off the shores of Western Sahara, the last colony in Africa.

Rich in resources and small in population, Western Sahara, victim since 1975 of a brutal and illegal Moroccan occupation, has a history shaped to a large extent by its immense resources. Indeed, natural resources have always been at the centre of the Western Sahara conflict, and were a key demand of the anti-Spanish protestors in the early 1970s. Spain exploited Western Sahara's rich phosphate reserves and Morocco continues to profit from the country's natural wealth. The latter is illegal since Morocco is not recognised internationally as holding sovereignty over Western Sahara, and indeed an occupying power cannot legally exploit the natural resources of the occupied country without the consent of the indigenous people of that country. I argue in this paper that it is only recently that sovereignty over these resources has started to become a prominent demand of the Saharawi activists resisting the Moroccan occupation. As I chart below, the Occupied Territories have a long history of mostly non-violent resistance, but the focus of the latter was, since the Moroccan invasion, traditionally on human rights and independence. What, then, has prompted the recent turn towards natural resources in the demands of the protestors and what are the wider implications of this turn?

This article relies on 20 individual (recorded) interviews, several personal conversations and communications and two discussion groups (one with seven participants in Agadir on 22 April 2014, the other with six in Marrakesh on 23 April 2014) with Saharawis conducted in occupied El Aaiún, Western Sahara, in August 2014, Rabat, Marrakesh and Agadir, Morocco, in April to May 2014, Zaragoza, Spain, in November 2014, and the Saharawi refugee camps/state-in-exile in December 2015, as well as one telephone interview with a Solidarity Activist (a founding member and ex-Chair of the Europe-based solidarity group Western Sahara Resource Watch (WSRW)) and observation of a four-hour workshop on natural

resources for 22 Saharawi activists led by the Saharawi group Saharawi Campaign against the Plunder (SCAP), in Boujdour camp, Algeria, December 2015. Since June 2015 I have been Chair of WSRW and have volunteered with the organisation since 2009. Thus, the article also draws, to some extent, on my personal experiences.

Interviewees were selected for the most part for their roles leading campaigns against natural resource exploitation. However, the discussion groups in Moroccan cities were with nationalist activists that did not necessarily have links to natural resource campaigns. Similarly, five interviews (with Nguia Haouasi, Soukaina Yaya, Hassana Aalia, Fatan Abaali and Hayat Rguibi) and one personal conversation (with Ali Salem Tamek) were conducted in order to gain the views and experiences of activists working within the wider Saharawi resistance in the Occupied Territories but not necessarily with a primary focus on resources, and one, with the Deputy Representative of the Saharawi state-in-exile to the UK, to ascertain the official perspective of the POLISARIO. The study forms part of a wider Ph.D. project on gender and resistance in Western Sahara and Equatorial Guinea funded by the University of Leeds.

In the first section of the article, I chart the emergence of the Saharawi pro-independence movements in the face of Spanish colonial rule and how the issue of natural resources exploitation was framed within the nationalist struggle. Following this, I look briefly at the Saharawi non-violent resistance movement in the occupied part of Western Sahara post the Moroccan colonisation, and why its demands went 'underground' at first, then re-emerged to focus on human rights, socio-economic grievances and independence. Thirdly, I focus on the Gdeim Izik protest, when natural resource-related demands came explicitly back on the scene. I then explore in more depth why natural resource exploitation has only resurfaced as a demand amongst civilian activists in recent years, before finally analysing the implications of this turn.

The Spanish colonial period and the discovery of petroleum deposits

Today Western Sahara's natural wealth is under Moroccan control, with King Mohammed VI and members of the makhzan (Morocco's pro-monarchy elite class and state apparatus), in many cases, profiting personally from its extraction. Nevertheless, its economic exploitation can be traced back to Spanish colonial times. The colonisation of Western Sahara was carried out by a few Spanish imperialists and merchants, followed by a handful of small companies and indeed, at first, the Spanish colonial project was an exclusively commercial one (Munene 2008, 91). The objective was to create a series of small, fortified settlements along the Sahara's coast. The first was built in what was to be the colonial capital, Villa Cisneros, modern-day Dakhla, in 1884–1885 (San Martín 2010, 26), and later buildings were erected in Tarfaya and Lagwirah in 1916 and 1920, respectively (Zunes and Mundy 2010, 100). The Spanish could benefit from Western Sahara's rich fisheries and trade with Saharawi tribes and others travelling along the traditional caravan route from Senegal.¹

Private geological expeditions concluded in 1947 followed by government-commissioned surveys conducted between 1952 and 1962 found petroleum deposits in several locations both on land and offshore. However, due to low prices, low quality and lack of infrastructure, no companies invested (San Martín 2010, 51). The discovery of the largest phosphate reserves on earth (integral to producing agricultural fertilisers) was seen to be far more potentially lucrative and thus the colonial project expanded inland. Spain's state mining company EMINSA (later FOSBUCRAA) built the Fos Bucraa mine in 1968, including a 60-mile-long conveyor belt (the longest of its kind in the world) to transport the riches to the Atlantic ocean for export. Forty-six years on, Morocco makes use of this mine to dominate the global phosphate market with an 85% share. In 2014 alone, Fos Bucraa yielded an estimated 2.1 million tonnes of phosphate with an estimated value of \$230 million per annum (Western Sahara Resource Watch 2015).

Although by the 1960s, the UN was pressuring Spain to decolonise,² the expansion of the colonial project brought more and more Spanish settlers to Western Sahara, which was by then recognised as a Spanish province. Much of the Saharawi population became sedentary. Many men worked at the phosphate mine and men and women in the fisheries industry, providing a cheap labour force for resource exploitation, and others had jobs with the colonial administration. However, this is not to say that the population was not segregated. Indeed it was, and, unsurprisingly, the wealth of the territory was unequally divided in favour of the Spanish. This dissatisfaction, combined with the collapse of traditional forms of social organisation based on kinship, allowed the emergence a new sense of collective identity. As a 1973 Spanish population survey found, the Saharawis no longer identified themselves along tribal lines. Instead, they joked that all Saharawis belonged to the low-caste Znaga (tributary) tribe and paid tribute to the Spanish (San Martín 2010, 55).

Meanwhile, revolutionary fervour was spreading throughout the African continent, and Western Sahara would not escape the trend. Mohammed Bassiri, a Saharawi intellectual and moderate nationalist well versed in pan-Arabism and the socialist, anti-colonial currents flowing through Africa at that time, fostered the spreading of such political discourses amongst the Saharawi population. As the sense of a collective Saharawi identity and Bassiri's brand of nationalism diffused throughout Western Sahara, the origins of a pro-independence movement were sown. Nevertheless, following a 5000-strong Saharawi protest at Zemla Square, El Aaiún, 17 June 1970, several movement leaders were imprisoned or shot, and Bassiri was disappeared. This violent repression of a peaceful movement pushed the Saharawi nationalists towards armed struggle. Regarding these events, the Spanish leaders of Franco's Women's Section in the Sahara were told by Saharawi women, '[t]he historic moment was 17 June 1970. We can't trust you anymore ...' (Mateo 1974, 8). Shortly after the massacre and inspired by Zemla and Bassiri's group Harakat Tahrir, a group of young Saharawi university students who had been studying in Morocco formed the Frente Por la Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro (POLISARIO), led by the charismatic El Wali Mustafa Said (commonly known as 'El Wali').

Thus, the armed struggle began. At first, El Wali and his comrades travelled under cover around the territory to recruit supporters whilst activists such as Fatima Ghalia Leili began to train women in direct action methods (Interview with Soukaina Yaya, Activist born in the Spanish period, El Aaiún, 22 August 2014). POLISARIO and its women's wing the National Union of Saharawi Women (UNMS) carried on the ideological work that Bassiri had begun. POLISARIO nationalist ideology drew on revolutionary, socialist discourses that emphasised the centrality of the role of the popular masses for revolutionary change and the principle that collective interests should always precede those of the individual. POLISARIO envisaged an egalitarian, communal society, in which slavery was abolished and the emancipation of women was an aim (Allan 2010, 190). Saharawi nationalist discourses launched a reading of the social that, following what Laclau and Mouffe have named 'logic of equivalence', attempted to divide the field of discursivity into two opposing ideological blocks able to deny each other while 'decontesting' and making equivalent a whole series of more particular discourses, conflicts and grievances (1987). The discrimination against Saharawi employees in the Fosbucraa mine, the lack of access to educational and job opportunities for Saharawi women, the barriers to political participation for the younger generations of Saharawis, the racial discrimination suffered by black slaves and *harratin* (former slaves) were all made equivalent and acquired their meaning as different expressions of a single oppression: that of the colonialist foe – first Spain then Morocco and Mauritania later (Allan 2010, 190).

Under Spain, freedom from the colonial foe was expressed through POLISARIO discourse as independence for the Saharawi people and sovereignty over their natural resources. Spanish archives from the period indicate how, by 1974, such discourses were becoming hegemonic amongst the Saharawi population. A Spanish report on Saharawi women's political views, for example, found that women were almost without exception pro-independence and pro-self-determination, opposed to integration with any other country and supportive of the POLISARIO. Saharawi women were conscious of being 'rich people but the Spanish [were] taking what was theirs' (Mateo 1974, 20) and the phrase 'we are rich and we have phosphates' (Mateo 1974, 3) was reportedly 'repeatedly' heard by the Spanish researchers. Two events help to further illustrate how sovereignty over natural resources was welded, in the emerging nationalist discourses, with the dream of independence.

In October 1974, a 15-year-old Saharawi schoolgirl gathered together all her female classmates to plan a break-time protest against the Spanish presence in the territory. The girls complained that the Spanish had done nothing in the territory apart from 'discovering phosphates' and 'taking them away' (Mateo 1974, 9). On the 19th night of the same month, POLISARIO guerrillas sabotaged two stations of the Fosbucraa conveyor belt, costing Spain 'very serious' economic losses (Mateo 1974). Through the nationalist ideologies they sowed and made hegemonic, the POLISARIO made the natural wealth of the Western Sahara a key demand for Saharawi resistance against the Spanish. We shall see later how this demand was to resurface amongst civilian-led non-violent resistance during the Moroccan occupation.

Towards the end of 1974, under increasing pressure from the UN externally and

from the Saharawi movement internally, Spain announced its decision to hold a self-determination referendum for the Saharawi people and conducted a census for that purpose. Nevertheless, Morocco and Mauritania had other ideas, claiming Western Sahara as their own. The two countries took their claim to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1975 with the support of all Arab states, requesting an Advisory Opinion that would help consolidate their planned takeover legally. However, the ICJ did not issue the opinion that Morocco hoped for. Historical evidence did not 'establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mauritanian entity' but did show that, in pre-colonial times, the Moroccan Sultan had no control over Western Sahara and nor did the sultanate claim that the territory was under its control (International Court of Justice 1975). Thus, the ICJ urged the application of General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) for 'the decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory' (International Court of Justice 1975).

The day after the ICJ ruling King Hassan II announced on Moroccan television that the Court had ruled in his favour and that he would therefore lead a 'peaceful' Green March of over 300,000 Moroccan civilians into Western Sahara. Spain, unwilling to face an unpopular and expensive war with Morocco and Mauritania, and cowed by pressure from the US, conceded through a tripartite agreement signed on 14 November 1975 to divide Western Sahara between its two African neighbours. In exchange for selling out its colony, Spain would have the right to a 35% share of any future mineral exploitation as well as certain rights over fisheries (Zunes and Mundy 2010 , Chapter 1).

In November 1975, 350,000 Moroccan civilians marched on foot towards the cities of Western Sahara. Meanwhile, the Moroccan army entered with tanks and aeroplanes. They bombed groups of fleeing Saharawis (roughly half the population remained in the region of Western Sahara that was to become occupied) with napalm and white phosphorus (San Martín 2010 , 2). These civilians were heading on foot to Algeria, which had offered asylum in its Hamada: the driest and most inhospitable part of its desert, where the Saharawi refugees remain to this day. It was here that the POLISARIO set up its state-in-exile, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) originally proclaimed in Bir Lehlou, in the liberated part of Western Sahara, on 27 February 1976.

The Mauritanian forces were little match for the guerrilla tactics of the POLISARIO. Mauritania retreated in 1979, signing a peace deal with the Saharawis, by which time Morocco had been all but entirely driven out of the territory (Mauritania has since recognised the SADR). However, unfortunately for the POLISARIO, over the next decade the tide was turned by Morocco's long term allies Saudi Arabia, France and the US, who offered financial and military backing and sponsorship for the world's largest active military wall (Zunes and Mundy 2010 , Chapter 1). Approximately 2700 km in length, the 'Wall of Shame', as it is known by Saharawis, splits the POLISARIO-controlled and Moroccan-occupied territories into two and is heavily fortified by minefields (San Martín and Allan 2007). This put Morocco in a strong position for

negotiating once the UN moved back on the scene in an attempt to establish a ceasefire in 1991. The latter was predicated on the promise of a self-determination referendum for the Saharawis. Yet the vote has been repeatedly blocked by Morocco, leaving the UN-sponsored solution to the conflict in a quagmire. The POLISARIO, left without a realistic military option in the face of Moroccan military superiority and its powerful western allies (this, nevertheless, has not prevented growing calls for a return to war), has since continued on the seemingly stagnant political path. Meanwhile, in the Occupied Territories, a non-violent movement of Saharawi civilians has emerged, whose resistance will be the focus of the next section of this article.

Non-violent resistance in occupied Western Sahara: human rights, socio-economic grievances and independence

During the early 1980s, acts of resistance were largely clandestine. The open calls for independence and sovereignty over natural resources that overwhelmed the Spanish during their last 18 months in the territory were simply not thinkable amidst the terror of the Moroccan occupation. Nevertheless, what James C. Scott might call a 'hidden transcript', conspicuous acts of defiance against the occupation played out behind closed doors, thrived. POLISARIO radio announcements were listened to beneath blankets to muffle the sound (Interview with Sultana Khaya, Activist and President of the Saharawi League for Natural Resources and Human Rights (Saharawi League) 26 November 2014), pro-POLISARIO leaflets were distributed in secret and wanted activists were hidden in safe houses. The most daring Saharawis organised what they called 'operations', which involved writing Saharawi slogans and painting the SADR flag on the walls of Moroccan administrative buildings and swapping Moroccan flags for SADR ones (personal communications with ex-disappeared Malainin Lakhali, October 2013).

James C. Scott's argues that public, declared resistance (petitions, strikes, demonstrations and so on) are mainly the preserve of western liberal democracies, whilst communities that are unable to publically protest safely use what Scott calls *infrapolitics* (hidden transcripts, everyday acts of resistance and dissident subcultures, as was the case of the Saharawis in the early 1980s) (1990). Declared and open rebellion will only break out amongst such an oppressed community, argues Scott, when 'the pressure [of indignation] rises or when there are weaknesses in the "retaining wall" holding it back' (1990, 197). Yet this explanation does not fully account for the case of Western Sahara. In 1987, when Moroccan repression was at its height and disappearances of Saharawis were menacingly common, Saharawi activists organised a major human rights protest in El Aaiún, when the UN was visiting to begin preparing the referendum on the fate of territory. Such declared resistance despite the inevitable violent repression that protesters must have expected to face illustrates that the strategic need to perform resistance to an external audience (and thereby further disseminate a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenged Moroccan hegemony) is also important in explaining why resistance becomes open and public. Whilst, between the Moroccan invasion and 1987, Saharawi civilians in the Occupied Territories relied on the covert, hidden

resistance tactics that Scott would call the weapons of the weak, the UN visit presented a political opportunity that activists tried to capitalise on, launching, for the first time under Moroccan colonisation, an open and mass protest.

Dozens of organisers and participants in this 1987 protest were forcibly disappeared, including Aminatou Haidar, one of the unofficial leaders of the resistance, who was imprisoned and tortured for four years. She and 299 other formerly disappeared Saharawis, including whole families in a few cases – some of whom were detained post the 1987 protest and others during the 1970s and earlier in the 80s, but all of whom had been kept incommunicado and without trial – were released in 1991 coinciding with the ceasefire (US Department of State 2003). The release of these political prisoners helped to inspire greater resistance amongst a younger generation of Saharawis (Barca and Zunes 2009, 159). The new presence of the UN in the territory also gave many activists renewed confidence to 'go public' in their acts of resistance, since they felt they now had international eyes on them, in itself a form of protection (personal communication with Malainin Lakhel, 13 May 2014).

Saharawi activists have since been proved wrong. MINURSO, the UN mission to the territory is highly unusual in that it is a peacekeeping mission with no mandate to monitor human rights. Every April, the UN Security Council votes on the inclusion of human rights monitoring in the MINURSO's mandate, and every year France, Morocco's most loyal ally, uses the threat of veto to block this. As such, even when Saharawis are publically beaten in the square in front of the UN building (which, incidentally sports a Moroccan but not a Saharawi flag outside), UN staff look the other way. Some Saharawi protestors even report attempting to seek refuge in the UN building only to be handed over to Moroccan police by MINURSO staff (conversations with political activist Hamza Lakhel, El Aaiún, August 2014).

The *intifadas* of the early 1990s (much smaller in terms of participation and shorter in time than the better researched and documented *intifadas* of 1999 and 2005 but known as *intifadas* by Saharawis nonetheless), such as the *Intifada of Three Cities* in Smara, Assa and El Aaiún in 1991, called for freedom for political prisoners, protested against the holding of Moroccan elections in Western Sahara and even demanded independence.³ Especially for this latter demand, the uprisings were harshly oppressed, resulting in several forced disappearances and decades-long prison sentences for participants. For this reason, when the 1999 *intifada* burst onto the scene inspired by the release of several Saharawi political prisoners viewed as heroes and the perceived political opportunities following the death of Hassan II (Shelley 2004, 115), demands were to focus on human, students' and workers' rights, leaving the more dangerous demand of independence for the later 2005 *intifada* (M. Lakhel, pers. comm., 13 May 2014). The latter saw explicitly nationalist protests across Western Sahara and the Saharawi-dominated areas of southern Morocco, and incorporated all sectors of the population, from school children to old women and men (Stephan and Mundy 2006).

A dark cloud over the Saharawi struggle: commercial quantities of oil?

As illustrated throughout this article, Western Sahara's natural resources have been exploited by its colonisers since the end of the nineteenth century. The expense of maintaining its occupation of Western Sahara has been made worthwhile by Morocco's ability to sell the fish, agricultural produce, phosphates, salt, sand, wind and solar energy of its colony. For example, all offshore fishing is by Moroccan-owned trawlers, and of the traditional inshore fishing, very few licenses are granted to Saharawis (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Western Sahara 2014). In Dakhla, where fishing is the major industry, only 5% of workers are Saharawi. The phosphate industry currently employs around 3000 workers, amongst which only 21% are Saharawi (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Western Sahara 2014). The latter tend to be employed in the lowest paid jobs such as cleaning (Personal interview with Sidi Breika, POLISARIO Deputy Representative to the UK, London, 31 March 2014) and indeed fewer than 4% of technicians are Saharawi. All tomato farms are owned by the Moroccan Royal Family, powerful Moroccan conglomerates or by French multinational firms. None are owned by Saharawis, or indeed by small-scale Moroccan settlers (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Western Sahara 2014). Looking East, the 165,000 Saharawi refugees living on humanitarian aid in the camps in Algeria receive no compensation from the exploitation of their natural resources (UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) 2015).

The potential exploitation of the petroleum deposits first discovered by the Spanish in the 1940s and 1950s is now looming over the desert territory. It is the economic profit on Morocco's part that darkens the horizon for Saharawi aspirations of independence. The beginning of oil exploration contracts could be about to dramatically swell that profit. Morocco's illegal oil and gas programmes currently consist of six blocks in the waters of Western Sahara, each issued to companies by ONHYM (Western Sahara Resource Watch 2013, 4). Two British companies, Teredo Oil Limited and Cairn Energy, hold shares in the Boujdour Offshore Shallow Block and the Cap Boujdour Offshore Block, respectively (Western Sahara Resource Watch 2013, 4), whilst Irish/British San Leon began drilling onshore, near El Aaiún city, in March 2015. Cairn Energy, with its partner Kosmos, moved their rig to begin drilling the one billion barrel potential Gargaa Prospect in their block in December 2014. Nevertheless, the signing of the oil and gas agreements coincides with a new phase in Saharawi resistance. The demand that was so prominent under the Spanish, sovereignty over natural resources, is emerging once again, as is discussed in the next section.

The Gdeim Izik Intifada: 'The Saharawi people suffer whilst its wealth is looted'⁴

The Gdeim Izik protest of 2010 has been described by Noam Chomsky as the beginning of the Arab Spring. '[T]he greatest demonstration carried out by Saharawis' (Breika, pers. int., 31 March 2014) saw 15,000– 20,000 create a tent city in the desert of the outskirts of El Aaiún. As Wilson highlights (2013, 91), if we take as a guide the latest available UN estimates for the total Saharawi adult population in the Occupied Territories in 2000, which was 41,150, the huge scale of the protest in proportional terms is better appreciated (although the UN figure is a conservative estimate). Also as Wilson points out, the Gdeim Izik protest took place in the

temporal, geographical and conceptual margins of the Arab Spring (2013, 82). Its highly organised nature (the camp acted as a fully functioning society, complete with regular rubbish collections, medical surgeries, committees for negotiation with the Moroccan authorities and the distribution of food, water and other essentials) illustrates that the Saharawis are 'able to survive and organise themselves without any need for the Moroccan colonial administration' (Lakhal 2014, pers. comm.) As Mundy argues, its desert camp format was also meant to show solidarity with the Saharawi refugees of Algeria (2011).

Says one of the administrators of the camp, 'the main objective was, amongst other things, to stop the massive exploitation of Western Sahara's resources' (Activist interviewed in Sahara Thawra 2012). Hassana Aalia, who has been sentenced, in absentia, to life imprisonment for allegedly organizing the camp,⁵ sees natural resource exploitation as a principal reason for the emergence of the latter: 'the multinationals and the European Union are still robbing our natural resources, whilst the Saharawi population is poorer and poorer, and suffering increasing unemployment' (Personal interview with Aalia, Zaragoza, 26 November 2014). Aalia's colleague Nguia Elhaouasi, currently serving a suspended sentence for her alleged role in the camp, agrees:

The Gdeim Izik camp came about following so much pressure against the Saharawi population. We have no right to work. There are many graduates, some even have a doctorate, but none of them can get a job. And we don't benefit from our natural resources: the fisheries, the phosphates...So under so much pressure, and without a right to our resources, the camp exploded. (Personal interview with Nguia Elhaouasi, Zaragoza, 26 November 2014)

Indeed, common slogans chanted at the encampment included, as quoted above, 'the Saharawi people suffer whilst its wealth is looted', and 'our resources, we don't see them, they don't see us' (Breika, pers. int., 31 March 2014). Said another activist who lived at the camp, 'Gdeim Izik was concerned with social and political issues, and the natural resources of the Sahara, because Saharawi people are not for profit' (Personal interview with Fatan Abaali, Agadir, 22 April 2014).⁶ Indeed, when Saharawis comment on the activities of oil companies and others in their territory, they most often link their complaints to the socio-economic situation of their people. Explains one activist,

we focus on natural resources more than anything because there are a lot of jobless Saharawis. They see their fish, their sand, going to other countries and they get nothing from it. Their territory is not poor. It is rich. But Saharawis cannot even afford a few coins for coffee or cigarettes. (Personal interview with Ahmed Baba, Rabat, 28 April 2014)

When they heard, on 8 November 2010, that Moroccan security forces had surrounded Gdeim Izik and were proceeding to raze it to the ground, Saharawi activists in El Aaiún set fire to the premises of the Moroccan Ministry of Mines and Energy, which houses ONHYM (Western Sahara Resource Watch 2013, 9). Subsequently, and to this day, Saharawi activists living across occupied Western

Sahara, and Saharawi students living in Morocco proper, organise regular demonstrations against the oil companies that have signed agreements with OHNYM

It is worth pointing out that much of these protests are dominated by women. Practising politics, in the wide sense of the word, is constructed as a feminine as much as a masculine role in Saharawi culture, whilst Saharawi women's constructed role as mothers and homemakers allows them some flexibility with regard to the time and space to take part in demonstrations. On the other hand, men, due to their constructed masculine role as breadwinners, sometimes opt to avoid public forms of protest for fear of losing their jobs.

Returning to forms of protest against natural resource exploitation, hunger strikes against the oil industry have also been reported (Western Sahara Resource Watch [2013](#), 9), and YouTube video testimonies in which Saharawi women and men denounce individual oil companies in Arabic, English and Spanish are common.⁷ Saharawi activists have, in recent years, begun to set up organisations focused primarily on fighting the exploitation of natural resources such as oil by foreign players. The first of these was the Committee for the Protection of Natural Resources in Western Sahara (CSPRON) founded in 2006 in El Aaiún (Personal Communication with Lahcen Dalil, Vice President of CSPRON, 18 December 2014), followed by the Saharawi League for Human Rights and Natural Resources (Saharawi League) in 2011, Boujdour (S. Khaya, pers. int., 26 November 2014) and the Association for the Monitoring of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of Western Sahara, El Aaiún, 2015 (personal communication with the founders, 25 April 2015). Other Saharawi organisations such as the Saharawi Centre for Media and Communications, the Collective of Saharawi Defenders of Human Rights (CODESA) and Equipe Media that have, in the past, had a wider and more general focus have recently begun to attune their attention on natural resources as the exploitation of the same heightens (Personal interview with Mohammed Brahim (pseudonym), El Aaiún, August 25, 2014; Personal interview with Mohammed Mayara, El Aaiún, August 27, 2014; Personal conversation with Ali Salem Tamek, Auserd camp, December 12, 2015). Significantly, the leaders of both CSPRON and Saharawi League have suffered serious harassment from the Moroccan authorities. Sidahmed Lemjayed, President of CSPRON, was sentenced to life imprisonment for his involvement in the Gdeim Izik camp in a Moroccan show trial in 2013 (Human Rights Watch [2013](#)). Sultana Khaya, Founder and President of Saharawi League, is, at the time of writing, visiting a specialist hospital in Spain following serious stomach injuries sustained during torture. She has previously lost an eye during police torture (S. Khaya, pers. int., 26 November 2014). Other members of Saharawi League were injured by police in March 2014 during their peaceful protest against the Kosmos-Cairn oil exploration partnership (Western Sahara Resource Watch [2014](#)).

Outside of the Occupied Territories, Saharawi Natural Resource Watch (OSRN), a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) set up in the state-in-exile in April 2013, and another NGO known as SCAP also initiated in the camps in March 2015, are able to work without the barrier of police repression. Since OSRN and SCAP have begun operating, there has been a large increase in protests, in the camps, against specific

multinationals and governments involved in natural resource exploitation. Most notable was the October 2015 protest against British/Irish energy company San Leon in Auserd camp, attended by some 8000 Saharawis.⁸ Similarly, the POLISARIO has launched a diplomatic war against would-be oil exploiters. As well as speaking out in the media against the activities and engaging both the companies themselves and the UN Security Council (Western Sahara Resource Watch 2013 , 9), the government of the Saharawi state-in-exile has begun its own programme of issuing Assurance Agreements for oil companies to explore offshore blocks, which can be taken up when POLISARIO gains access to the territories currently occupied by Morocco⁹ as well as onshore blocks in the liberated territories of Western Sahara, already controlled by POLISARIO.¹⁰ Indeed, POLISARIO is well aware that oil revenue could be an important source of income for a future Saharawi state and has, in May 2014, adopted a Mining Code. Furthermore, as Stephan and Mundy (2006, 31) have pointed out, by offering the same blocks that Morocco has promised to other companies, the POLISARIO hopes to encourage an international legal battle.

Current agreements between oil multinationals and the Moroccan state-owned oil company the National Office for Hydrocarbons and Mines (ONHYM) stand to offer minimum economic benefits for Saharawis. Rather, energy companies risk adding political legitimacy and significant funding to Morocco's occupation whilst simultaneously creating further barriers to the UN's peace process, showing complicity in the human rights abuses against the Saharawi people and, should oil be found, depleting the natural resources of the Saharawis, meaning that the latter would not benefit upon achieving independence. The Saharawis are increasingly aware of these implications. Social movement scholars argue that the political power of resistance movements is related to the latter's ability to take advantage of political opportunities and respond to political threats (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Saharawis have identified the growing exploitation of natural resources as a political (and ever growing) threat to their struggle for independence, and, thus, sovereignty over natural resources has become a strategic target of their resistance. Through their protesting and campaigning, Saharawis have illustrated that any oil exploration and extraction activities will be undertaken without their consent, against their express wishes. Again, in the Occupied Territories, where, as we have seen, activists are serving life sentences and have faced torture for their open resistance to resource exploitation, Saharawis nevertheless bear the risks of declared, public resistance, since they are aware of the need for their resistance to be observed by foreign companies.

Why are natural resources coming to the fore only now?

As I have illustrated above, natural resources have been at the heart of Western Sahara's sufferings under both Spanish and Moroccan colonialism. Nevertheless, it is only relatively recently that natural resources have started to re-surface and once again feature as a key demand in the protests of Saharawi activists as they had in the Spanish period. As we have seen, the Saharawi resistance movement in the Moroccan-occupied Territories has evolved over time, focusing first on human rights and socio-economic complaints (although the nationalist question was always raised

in clandestine actions) and, as fear eroded in the second intifada, latterly on independence. Now, the demands of activists are widening even further, and natural resources are coming to the fore. In the words of Malainin Lakhal,

The peaceful resistance has always progressed little by little in accordance with the possibilities offered, and with careful progress building on the past experience. Before, it was very dangerous to show one's political views, so the activists used social, economic and cultural claims to create an atmosphere of resistance in the society. Now, I think that we are in a phase in which the struggle is on at all levels, and intentionally (M. Lakhal, pers. comm., 13 May 2014).

It has been argued by social movement scholars that international actors can serve as useful allies for resistance activists (McAdam 1998, 257; Ghalea 2013, 259). In the Saharawi case, a greater interest amongst international solidarity groups in natural resources has also sparked parallel raised awareness amongst Saharawi activists (M. Mayara, pers. int., 27 August 2014). As one Saharawi woman explained, 'we just didn't know about the plunder until very recently, so we have only just started to focus on it' (Zahra Taleb (pseudonym), personal conversations, Boujdour camp, 9 December 2015).

When it comes to investigating the natural resource exploitation activities of foreign companies, activists based in the global North are often in a privileged position vis-à-vis Saharawis living in the Occupied Territories for several reasons. First, when companies and foreign governments publish information about their planned activities in Western Sahara they tend to do so in English, a language spoken by few Saharawi residents of the Occupied Territories. Second, reliable access to the internet is also enjoyed by Northern solidarity groups to a much greater extent than for the Saharawis. Third, lobbying against a national company or government is facilitated if one is a resident and/or citizen of the nation in question: the company and its shareholders can be visited, and one's representative in parliament can be harnessed. Finally, international groups do not face the violent repression of the Moroccan authorities, and are more likely to have the material resources necessary for lobbying. For all these reasons, the international solidarity movement was able to play a key role in the first fight against oil company activity in Western Sahara.

In 2003, the Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara launched a campaign against the involvement of Norwegian company TGS-Topec in conducting seismic surveys in the Occupied Territories. Simultaneously, a solidarity organisation in Holland began to pressure Dutch Fugro Group to halt its own surveying activities in the region. Thanks to the campaign, TGS-Topec suffered massive divestment and deserted its activities in Western Sahara. Threatened with the same, Fugro too pulled out. The Dutch and Norwegian groups then joined forces with Saharawi solidarity groups in 12 other countries, which together launched a fight against American Kerr-McGee. The US company pulled out of Western Sahara, but not before responsible investors (including the world's largest public investment fund the Norwegian Petroleum fund) divested some \$80 million over the affair (Western Sahara Resource Watch 2013, 3).

As well as lobbying against companies and governments involved in the plunder of Western Sahara, international solidarity groups such as WSRW have held workshops with Saharawi activists from the Occupied Territories and camps focusing on advocacy and campaigning. It is also significant that Saharawis and international groups such as WSRW enjoy a symbiotic relationship. WSRW, whose International Coordinator is based in Belgium, supported by volunteer coordinators and members across Europe but also in the Americas, Australasia and Africa, can keep Saharawis in the Occupied Territories and camps up-to-date about the activities of companies and governments of the home countries of its members whilst WSRW needs the Saharawis' videos, information and photographs, and the latter's expertise in non-violent direct action, to support its lobbying. Indeed, international activists are often monitored, detained and expelled when they attempt to visit the Occupied Territories, heightening the extent to which they rely on partnerships with local Saharawi civil society groups and activists.

Educational (in)opportunity is another important factor in explaining why natural resources have become foregrounded in the demands of Saharawi activists relatively recently. Saharawi students lament the lack of opportunity to study English (a language, as mentioned, important for following the activities of foreign companies via the internet) since the Moroccan education system focuses on French. Discrimination against Saharawi students is common, and, since there are no universities in Western Sahara, access to higher education is not open to the less well off. Nevertheless, those Saharawis that do manage to club together the funds to travel and live in Morocco proper often do so with the national struggle in mind. Cheikh Khaya, Activist with Saharawi League, states, 'I chose Law and English in order to help my people. Most students study law because it will help the cause' (Khaya cited in Allan [2015](#)). Similarly, Ahmed Baba, a Ph.D. student in International Law at the University of Marrakesh, explains,

The majority of Saharawi higher education students choose to focus on law. But there is no background of scholarship in international law amongst our people. We are the first generation to do this. The previous generations were too busy defending their land. The generation of the seventies and eighties was either involved in the war or exiled to the camps. The nineties, after the war stopped, was a time of assassinations and arrests, especially of those studying. That's why we have a gap in the education of those in the Occupied Territories. (Baba cited in Allan [2015](#))

When activists such as Khaya and Baba return home, the university students engage with their compatriots, showing how key parts of international law could be used to support the arguments made in lobbying and advocacy work. Students that have studied foreign languages help activists to create banners and slogans against foreign corporations in the latter's own tongue (Discussion groups... 2014).

The issue of hope is one more reason Saharawi activists have turned their attention back to natural resources in recent years. At the time of writing, it has been 24 years since the ceasefire. UN-brokered talks between POLISARIO and Morocco have offered no fruit. One Saharawi woman's reason for attending a workshop focused on

the natural resources dimension of the Western Sahara conflict in the refugee camps is illuminating in this regard: 'I can see that the diplomatic path is going nowhere, and so some young people want to go back to war. I don't want war, and I see natural resources as another possible path towards our independence' (Taleb (pseud.), pers. conv., 2 December 2015). A development in the diplomatic route, recent at the time of writing, arguably underlines the logic and urgency of this woman's simultaneous rejection of war and exasperation at the UN process. In March 2016, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon visited the Saharawi camps, and in a press conference there described the Moroccan presence in Western Sahara as an 'occupation'. This outraged Morocco, which, in protest, ordered the expulsion of 84 MINURSO civilian staff members and the closure of a military liaison office. The UN complied, raising questions as to whether or not MINURSO is now logistically capable of organising a referendum and resulting in new threats by the POLISARIO of a return to war. After all, it only agreed to the 1991 ceasefire due to the UN-promised referendum on self-determination with the option of independence.

Finally, the role of the internet is also an important one to raise when discussing the recent re-emergence of natural resources amongst Saharawi civilian non-violent activists. It was only in 2001 and 2002 that Saharawis began to have access to mobile phones and the internet in the Occupied Territories (Breika, pers. int., 31 March 2014), access in the camps is intermittent, and activists still face issues such as surveillance, blocking and hacking by Moroccan authorities (Brahim (pseud.), pers. int., August 25, 2014; Discussion groups... 2014). On the other hand, despite these barriers, from the time of Gdeim Izik onwards the sharing of information regarding natural resource exploitation by Saharawis via social media has become far more visible (Telephone interview with Erik Hagen, former Chair and founding member of WSRW, 28 February 2014). Mohammed Saleh, one of the founders of SCAP, based in the Saharawi state-in-exile, puts it well when he refers to how social media can help Saharawis overcome the Moroccan-imposed media blockade (foreign journalists have a hard time entering occupied Western Sahara): 'Social media is an open space. Its success as a strategy depends on the Saharawis themselves. You can no longer say that we don't have media coverage' (pers. conv. with Mohammed Saleh, 9 December 2015).

On the one hand, social media facilitates awareness-raising amongst Saharawis themselves regarding which companies are exploiting Western Sahara's resources and the implications of this exploitation. On the other hand, it is also a platform, as Saleh indicates, for sharing Saharawis' indignation at the exploitation internationally. Films and photographs of Saharawis demonstrating against resource exploitation are shared publicly with the concerned companies on Twitter and open letters penned in English by Saharawis to said companies are shared on blogs and webpages. Most recently, Saharawi Activist Senia Bachir Abderahman has highlighted the issue of natural resource exploitation in a Western Sahara edition of Al Jazeera's social media-focused programme The Stream.¹¹

What are the implications of the resource-turn in Saharawi resistance?

In the light of French oil giant Total's plans to begin searching for oil off Western Sahara's coast in 2001, the UN issued a legal opinion on the matter. Hans Corell, who was then the UN's Under-Secretary General for Legal Affairs, concluded that if further exploration and exploitation activities were to proceed in disregard of the interests and wishes of the people of Western Sahara, they would be in violation of the international law principles applicable to mineral resource activities in Non-Self-Governing Territories (Corell 2002). The international law principles to which he refers include Article 73 of the United Nations Charter and several General Assembly resolutions relating to the questions of the implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (Corell 2010, 276– 277). These resolutions are designed 'to protect the "inalienable rights" of the peoples of [non-self-governing] territories to their natural resources, and to establish and maintain control over the future development of those resources' and recognise 'the need to protect the peoples of Non-Self-Governing Territories from exploitation and plundering by foreign economic interests' (Corell 2010, 277).

In early 2015, Corell declared that Kosmos' activities were in no way in line with his legal opinion (Corell 2015). Later that year, in October 2015, the African Union (AU) published its own legal opinion, stating in no uncertain terms that any company, state or group of states exploring or exploiting natural resources do so in violation of international law, and calling for an Africa-wide boycott of such companies, states and groups of states (The Office of the Legal Counsel and Directorate for Legal Affairs of the African Union Commission 2015).

At the time of writing, none of the energy companies that have made agreements with ONHYM to access the six blocks offshore Western Sahara have published any evidence of how they have obtained the consent of the Saharawi people to carry out exploration activities. Yet Saharawis continue to take to the streets to passionately protest against such activities. In other words, since oil companies have decided not to consult them,¹² Saharawis have taken the initiative and illustrated, in no uncertain terms, that foreign corporations purchasing licenses for oil exploration from the Moroccan government do so against their wishes.

Saharawis are also combining their demonstrations and lobbying with legal action. POLISARIO won a case against the European Union (EU) in December 2015 in which the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) annulled an EU-Morocco Trade Agreement insofar as it applies to the territory of Western Sahara (the EU has appealed). A week later, oil company Total gave up its block in Western Sahara. The case is a pioneering legal success for the wider Saharawi struggle, and established that the POLISARIO has legal standing in the CJEU (the EU attempted to argue that it should not). The case will be followed by two further cases in the same court, one involving POLISARIO against the EU regarding a fisheries agreement that allows European vessels to fish in Western Sahara's waters) (Allan 2013, Sahara Press Service 2014), and another from Western Sahara Campaign (WSC), a group of British solidarity activists, against the British government regarding the misleading labelling of products from Western Sahara as Moroccan. It would be unsurprising if members of the oil industry are targeted next. Until now, foreign companies and the

likes of the EU have managed to side-step international law on exploiting the resources of an occupied country. The recent Court decision, should the appeal fail, implies this could be about to change.

The second implication of the pending oil exploration activities is potentially more deadly. At the start of a documentary on Gdeim Izik by the Spanish solidarity group Sahara Thawra, a Saharawi activist can be seen spraying graffiti 'the loss of all hope will make us free' on to a wall (Sahara Thawra 2012). Almost 40 years after the Moroccan invasion, Saharawis have long lost hope in Spain, in the UN and in the global powers, and gradually their hope in international civil society and international law is fading too. For some, war is the only option for freedom now that the hope of all other avenues has faded. A return to armed war is gaining popularity amongst the youth of the refugee camps. 'The pressure to return to war is becoming almost unbearable' said Mohammed Abdelaziz, President of the SADR, in an interview (McTighe 2013).

In the Occupied Territories too, the pressure is mounting. The violent clashes between Saharawis and Moroccan authorities following the dismantling of Gdeim Izik camp, which resulted in several deaths, are indicative of this change in mentality, especially since the Saharawi resistance movement up to this point had been non-violent. The young, jobless Saharawis, without realistic aspirations and under the weight of constant repression often describe themselves as 'buried alive', or, as Hamza Lakhal tells it, 'lots of people have big dreams here. But they can't achieve them because they are Saharawi' (Personal conversations with Hamza Lakhal, El Aaiún, August 2014). More and more are in favour of war. Says Khawla Khaya, soon to complete her studies in Rabat and with no prospects of a job back home, 'I'll be the first in line to sign up to fight' (Khaya quoted in Allan 2015).

Conclusions

Under Spanish rule, the emerging discourses of the POLISARIO gave rise to a Saharawi national identity, and within these discourses, natural resources, above all phosphates, become a symbol of colonised nationhood, a claim to be staked by the new and fast-growing Saharawi independence movement. Nevertheless, the Moroccan invasion in 1975 and subsequent repressive occupation of the resource-rich portion of Western Sahara pushed the resistance of the remaining Saharawi civilians underground. The activists relied on what Scott has called 'the weapons of the weak', that is, covert and everyday acts of resistance, for over a decade. It was not until an important external actor, the UN, visited the territory in 1987 that activists took the strategic decision to storm the public stage with an open and mass protest. Although this demonstration was harshly repressed, over the following decades open resistance continued, and with each intifada, new claims were pursued in line with the political opportunities that activists perceived. Thus in 1999, whilst pro-independence slogans were still seen as too risky and were largely tucked away until 2005, human rights and socio-economic demands were raised. By 2010, 35 years after the POLISARIO had first made sovereignty over phosphates a key demand for the pro-independence movement, international allies had begun to

work with Saharawis on the issue of natural resource exploitation with some significant successes encouraging the divestment of Big Oil. Natural resources became the key claim of the Gdeim Izik, the largest protest ever seen in Western Sahara. This outright contradicts the empty claims of oil companies that they have sought the consent of the Saharawi population to go ahead with their exploration and exploitation. The ramifications of this are not just legal (international law prohibits the exploitation of the resources of a territory under occupation unless its people consent) but deadly: whilst natural resource exploitation widens and deepens, calls amongst the Saharawi population to return to war grow. If the likes of Cairn, Kosmos and San Leon strike commercial quantities of oil in the coming months, it will have catastrophic consequences for the Saharawi independence activists. Time will tell if this will push the angry youth over the edge.

Notes

1. The first fortified settlement at Villa Cisneros intended to sell clothes, food, arms, mirrors, steel bars, donkeys and horses to the local nomads, whilst buying from them camels, gazelle furs, gold, Arabic gum and ostrich feathers, but trade never took off due to repeated Saharawi raids against the Spanish.
2. The first UN General Assembly Resolution on the matter was number 2229 (XXI) in December 1966, which called for Spain to grant self-determination to the peoples relating to the territories of Sidi Ifni and Spanish Sahara’.
3. For an analysis of the 1992 Intifada of three cities, see Barona Castañeda (2015)
4. Originally quoted as ‘Ahel essahra daau daau welkhaira t illa yenba t u’ (The Sahrawi people suffers while its wealth is looted) by Alice Wilson from a video of protests filmed by Sahara Thawra. (Wilson 2013, 88).
5. Saharawis charged with organising the camp argue that the camp arose in a largely organic and non-hierarchical fashion, although youth activists took a leading role in administering all aspects of the camp, and organised committees for this purpose, once it emerged.
6. Ali Salem Tamek, one of the unofficial leaders of the resistance in the Occupied Territories, also asserts that natural resources were at the heart of the Gdeim Izik protests, as did participants of the discussion groups in Agadir (22 April 2014) and Marrakech (23 April 2014). Personal conversation with Ali Salem Tamek, Auserd camp, Algeria, 12 December 2015.
7. See www.wsrw.org for a few examples.
8. Footage of the protest can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mChmF9tzHag>. Last accessed 4 January 2016.
9. See the SADR’s oil and gas webpage for more information: <http://www.sadrolandgas.com>.
10. For more on this programme of agreements, see Kamal (2015)
11. Watch the programme here: <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201511250121-0025099>. Last accessed 13 January 2015.
12. Kosmos has published a Position Paper in which it claims to have consulted with ‘the people of the territory’ through a Moroccan partner. However, according to all Saharawi grassroots organisations mentioned in this paper, only Moroccan settlers have been consulted despite the Saharawis’ restless if unsuccessful attempts to

contact Kosmos and be included in the consultation process. Cairn has made no attempt to consult with Saharawis and has failed to respond to letters and requests for meetings from Saharawi civil society organisations and British Members of Parliament.

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